

# Edmonton Journal

## Hondurans bless the peacemakers: Visitors say thanks for help from Edmonton Christians

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Illustrations: Photo: Rick MacWilliam, the Journal / Dave Hubert, left, with Hondurans Felix Flores and Jose Vasquez, right, visit The King's University College, which supports the work of Christian Peacemakers International.

Photo: Supplied / Florinda Hernandez got a \$50 loan from CPI to set up a small store in Buenos Aires, Honduras. Seen here with Jose Vasquez of CPI, Hernandez bought inventory and paid off her loan in 30 days. Subsequent loans for more money were always paid on time. Florinda is now on her fifth loan, one for \$500 which bought a store freezer.

Photo: Journal Stock / (See hard copy for graphic.)

EDMONTON -- Boarding a plane for the first time in his life and flying thousands of kilometres to Edmonton was a bit daunting for Jose "Chepe" Vasquez of Honduras.

But Vasquez, a Lenca Indian and a 53-year-old father of 14, managed to suck up his fear-of-flying jitters and get on that plane.

He dearly wanted to come here and personally thank those who through a variety of initiatives have made such a difference to the people of his Honduran village.

Vasquez, a Catholic catechist in his village (a sort of lay priest), can't believe the change of attitude among his people since Christian Peacemakers International (CPI) began lending a helping hand to the people of Balin in northern Honduras.

"Before, the people didn't have hope," says Vasquez, who is chairman of Accion Christiana por la Paz (ACP), the southern partner for Christian Peacemakers.

"Now they have a lot of hope," he adds. "And what gives them that hope is the expectations they have from the project."

Accompanied by fellow ACP official Felix Flores, Vasquez visited Edmonton last week. The two men had plenty of opportunities to extoll the important work of Christian Peacemakers, which besides the village of Balin, has projects in four other villages on the outskirts of Santa Cruz.

Christian Peacemakers is an interdenominational group founded in 1997 by members of local Mennonite churches working with refugees from Central America. The idea is that by providing new approaches, Christian Peacemakers will become a model for peacemaking in a region of the world where 400 years of violence have taken their toll.

Its lofty aims are to address the structural causes of conflict and violence in Honduras. In years to come, the group

plans to bring its model of peacemaking partnerships to other areas of Honduras, and eventually to branch out to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Honduras is the poorest country in Central America. Two thirds of its 6.8 million people live below the World Bank poverty line of \$2 a day, and in many rural areas, under \$1 a day. Such abject poverty and the continuing cycle of violence in that country are the reasons Christian Peacemakers targeted Honduras first.

Dave Hubert, chairman of the CPI board, says it's because of war and terrible human rights abuses in the 1980s that about 10,000 Central American refugees call Edmonton home today.

He should know. Hubert was the first executive director of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers that has for many years helped settle refugees who end up in this city. He's also the founding chairman of the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity.

"The conclusion that we came to," says Hubert, "was why not settle things down there so there's no more refugees coming from Central America, rather than trying to patch things up when they're already here."

Hubert has made several trips to Honduras since being part of a relief effort that built several homes in that country in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. The 1998 hurricane killed about 5,600 people and caused almost \$1 billion in damage.

Last week, it was Hubert's turn to play host to Vasquez and Flores, two of the leading figures with Accion Christiana por la Paz. Flores, an agronomist with many years of

rural development experience, much of it with World Vision, is the project co-ordinator of ACP.

During last week's visit, Vasquez and Flores spoke to several groups including Mennonite and Christian Reformed congregations as well as students at Edmonton Christian School.

They also met with officials with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace and the Sombrilla Refugee Support Society. Working with Sombrillo enabled Christian Peacemakers to get a two-to-one CIDA matching grant for \$85,000 -- and launch one of its five projects in the Santa Cruz area.

On a side trip to Calgary, the two men accepted a cheque for \$14,461 from a group of Alberta dentists known as Kindness in Action. In 2004 and 2005, about 25 dentists with that group visited the same region of Honduras and completed about 1,500 dental procedures.

In an interview at The King's University College, which also supports the work of Christian Peacemakers, Vasquez and Flores spoke through an interpreter. They observed that the greatest strength of ACP is that it is deliberately interdenominational -- in a country where it's uncommon for Catholics and evangelicals to work together.

"There isn't a program like it in the whole region," beamed Vasquez.

Flores, who was a former evangelical and is now a member of the Mennonite church, concedes that while some mistrust remains, barriers between different faith groups are gradually coming down thanks to the

groundwork laid by Christian Peacemakers. There are about 40 Mennonite churches in Honduras.

Looking ahead to three different worship services where he and Vasquez were invited to speak last Sunday, Flores said he would probably focus on the need for different faith groups to co-operate in working for the betterment of all.

"God has given this kingdom to all of us -- not only to evangelicals or Catholics," he said. "It's a responsibility for all to build this kingdom."

Dave Hubert, who sat in on the interview, spoke with obvious pride about the group's success in helping bridge the divisions between faith groups in Honduras. At one point he held up a picture of the ACP leadership, comprised of a rainbow of faith groups.

A continuing sore spot for Hubert, though, is that Revenue Canada has so far rejected its bid for charitable status. Hubert says Revenue Canada considers peacemaking to be "a political activity," yet it has no problem giving charitable status to air shows, which he maintains are used to market military aircraft.

"It's incomprehensible," fumes Hubert. "We can give charitable status to groups that are promoting violence and conflict and destruction. And for groups that are proposing to promote peace, they're denied."

Christian Peacemakers welcomes donations from anyone committed to peace and justice, and to seeking alternatives to violent conflict.

To contact Christian Peacemakers, call 462-6234 or e-mail [dehubert@telus.net](mailto:dehubert@telus.net).

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## WHAT IS CPI?

Christian Peacemakers International was founded in 1997 by members of Edmonton Mennonite churches working with refugees from Central America.

- In a 1998 pilot project, CPI built several homes in the Upper Sula Valley of Honduras in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch.

- Bringing faith communities together was the first peace project of CPI in conjunction with Accion Christiana por la Paz, its southern partner.

- Other programs underway include one to reduce domestic violence, the distribution of some 170 micro-loans which enable community and economic development, adult basic literacy, health care and dental care.